

Introduction to the Special Section: Disasters and Their Effects on Child Development

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Abstracts

The special section's papers collectively paint a picture of where disaster and development in children and adolescents research is at. The articles' diversity is impressive; they cover a wide range of crisis circumstances, such as war and the use of child soldiers, terrorism and political unrest, hurricanes and tsunamis, earthquakes and floods, as well as political unrest and climatic change. There are representations of specific calamities that happened in nine different nations. The articles cover a wide range of ages, from very young children through adolescents. In this field of study, longitudinal research and studies that focus on developmental processes are still uncommon. Although a few articles discuss additional levels of analysis, such as biological function and relationships, the majority of the articles concentrate on a behavioral level of function and analysis.

Keywords: Disaster, adolescents research, disaster and development in children

Introduction

Every year, a variety of disasters affect the lives of millions of children. These include armed conflict, genocide, industrial accidents, and terrorism as well as natural disasters including earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, and floods. Since the inception of the study of risk and resilience in development, scientists have been interested in how disasters affect children (Garmezy, 1985; Garmezy & Rutter, 1983). The Buffalo Creek disaster (Erikson, 1978; Green et al., 1991; Newman, 1976), World War II and the Holocaust (Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Moscovitz, 1985), or a significant fire were just a few of the sporadic studies of disasters that were published on young people over a long period of time (McFarlane, 1987)

There is more focus on the effects of disaster on children and youth at the beginning of the 21st century due to the rise in international terrorism, concerns about the flu pandemic, an alarming string of natural and man-made disasters around the world, and globalisation of media coverage (La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg, & Roberts, 2002; Masten & Obradovic', 2008; Osofsky, Osofsky, & Harris, 2007; Sagi-Schwarz Despite the inherent challenges of doing study in the aftermath of catastrophic occurrences, disaster research has increased. It seemed important to

dedicate a special section of this journal to the impact of catastrophes on child development given the significance of comprehending how various types of disasters may affect development for children and families.

Challenges in Disaster Research and Child Development

Research in a catastrophic situation is not for the weak of heart. From an ethical, intellectual, methodological, and practical standpoint, it is incredibly difficult. Both the investigators and the participants may experience stress and even danger. When conducting research with groups of traumatized survivors, special ethical considerations must be made. For their bravery and perseverance in the face of these challenges, as well as their sensitivity and success in carrying out their work, the authors of these essays deserve praise.

By their very nature, disasters present formidable difficulties to researchers. They frequently take place with little warning and cause such widespread destruction that they give rise to a wide range of study questions, from the ethical to the practical. The ability of recently traumatized individuals to give informed consent to research raises substantial questions in the early aftermath of a disaster when survival and fundamental needs take precedence over research. Additionally, conducting study with traumatized individuals near scenes of mass destruction can be hazardous as well as traumatic for the researchers. There may be numerous more risks associated with prolonged violence, both recognized and undiscovered.

Highlights of the Special Section's Findings

The conceptual frameworks for the papers in the special area strongly rely on the theory of developmental systems, and many of them place a strong emphasis on the ideas of cumulative risk and resilience (Masten & Obradovic, 2008). Response to tragedy is frequently influenced by the degree of exposure, referred to as a "dose-response gradient," by prior trauma experiences, or by the circumstances of the healing setting. According to the general risk literature, symptoms or issues are frequently linked to a higher cumulative exposure, measured by severity (intensity) or an accumulating number of traumatic experiences over time.

While this is going on, it's possible to notice startling variation in the gamut of behaviours displayed by people who have experienced roughly the same amount of trauma, which raises the possibility that disaster adaptation is influenced by other factors. These include individual variances as well as variations in the context or availability of services. For attempts to more effectively prepare for disaster and recover from it, promoting or protecting factors that foster resilience are especially important (Layne et al., 2009; Masten & Obradovic', 2008).

There is some evidence to support the idea that at very high levels of severe or prolonged exposure, the dose-response relation may alter. For instance, findings from a study of former child soldiers in Uganda (Klasen et al., current issue) did not indicate a connection between the level of trauma exposure during the abduction and forced service period and the outcomes following the abduction. It is conceivable that exposure levels may be so high in some groups that the relationship between dose and symptoms would disappear since everyone would have passed the point at which exposure would trigger a reaction or overwhelm coping mechanisms.

Promoting and Defending Elements

Several research in this area looked at how the adaptive behaviour of the young people they were studying varied, frequently within a resilience framework. As was already said, disaster research has been crucial to the development of resilience science. Studies with a resilience focus often analyse both positive and negative patterns of adaptation after disaster and strive to discover the conditions or characteristics that seem to promote or protect effective functioning during the crisis or recovery period after disaster. When risk or adversity is high, protective factors have a stronger impact or take on a different kind of role from those that are protective, which predicts better outcomes at all risk or adversity levels (a main effect).

It is also possible to think of moderating effects in terms of vulnerability rather than resilience when dealing with disasters. This distinction can be controversial because it is frequently difficult to tell whether an action is working to make the situation worse, better, or neither. However, when a group of people exhibit a certain characteristic that appears to make them particularly vulnerable to adversity's negative impacts, such characteristic is often defined as a vulnerability factor that increases risk.

Age and Gender Differences

The studies in this special area and the literature on disaster exposure and response in children and adolescents paint a complicated picture of gender and age impacts. The interpretation of both gender and age effects raises a host of methodological and conceptual problems. Young children are typically informed by their parents and teachers, but adolescents frequently self-report their symptoms or well-being. Because women are more likely than men to be the informants for young children, this confounds the respondent's response with the respondent.

Mothers, for instance, may note more symptoms in children than would be apparent to outsiders and may note different symptoms than a child would be able to. Similar to this, it is unclear whether female adolescents who report more symptoms than male adolescents do so because they actually have more symptoms or are just more open about reporting them.

Numerous research in this particular section identified age disparities in exposure, experiences during and after disasters, and post-disaster adjustment, albeit the results were not always consistent. In the epidemiological survey conducted by Becker-Blease et al., older children were generally more exposed to lifetime tragedy (this issue). While Betancourt et al. (this issue) did not discover comparable effects in their research of child soldiers from the conflict in Sierra Leone, Klasen et al. (this issue) noticed increased trauma and symptoms among the older of the former child soldiers in Uganda.

Conclusion

Consequences for Research

The focus of the special part is on the difficulties, developments, and gaps in the field of disaster and child development research. Massive roadblocks have slowed down progress. These include securing quick funding, especially for researchers who live in disaster-affected locations, as well as the inherent difficulties of conducting research in disaster-affected situations. However, there is also a severe lack of acceptable, standardized, and culturally relevant metrics in many disaster-prone areas, which is indicative of a much larger problem in developmental science. For developed countries compared to emerging regions, and dominant cultural groups compared to minority groups, there are many more research and validated metrics (Uintana et al., 2006).

Building a more comprehensive science of child development across cultures and countries would be very beneficial for study in many fields, and it is essential for research on disasters.

Despite the need for data on what may be most useful to whom and when following disaster, longitudinal data are rare, particularly with relation to research with predicate baselines. Building national and international supports and mechanisms for disaster research, including technical assistance and partnerships among groups of developmental scientists, humanitarian service providers, and local authorities or disaster responders, may require more focus.

Implications for Disaster Response and Preparation

The vast array of articles in this special part and the body of literature already in existence on catastrophes and child development offer crucial information for attempts to meet the needs of children and youth in disaster-related contexts as well as for developmental research. Disasters continue to occur all over the world despite the many gaps in the research, therefore it is reasonable to think about the significance of recent discoveries from the special area and earlier work for attempts to aid the numerous young victims of disaster. The results show some

consistency, which may provide useful direction for disaster preparedness and resilience building after disasters.

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